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ABSTRACT

Counselors can perform an invaluable service to teachers by leading teacher groups. Teacher groups have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to help beginning and experienced teachers significantly improve their attitudes in the affective domain. Teachers find that changing their attitudes creates an easier, more positive working relationship between the teacher and student. Counselors are encouraged to become of direct service to teachers by organizing and leading such groups. This paper describes a group, led by a counselor, wherein teachers were helped to solve classroom problems. (Author/CJ)

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The Teacher Group: A Positive Approach Counselors Can Use to Help Teachers Solve Classroom Problems

by
Ann G. Ruben, Ph.D.

Today's teachers face overwhelming responsibilities in their multi-faceted roles as employees of a school system, subordinates to the principals, advisors to supervisors, colleagues, followers as well as leaders. If this weren't enough, they are also expected to fill many roles with regard to their students in addition to that of educator: disciplinarian, substitute parent, confidante, and perpetuator of middle-class morality. It is no wonder that the pathways for teachers are fraught with frustrations. How can our society realistically expect one person to be all things to all people?

Teachers need help. School counselors can help them by learning to lead teacher groups. For example, listen to what Mary, Peter and Glenda, all elementary teachers, have to say as they meet with a counselor for help.

Mary: I sent Larry to the principal's office and the principal sent him back to me with another boy who said, 'The principal doesn't want to see his face.' Well, I didn't want to see his face either. He was disturbing the whole class.

Peter: I get annoyed when kids don't learn. I find that when I say, 'Shut up or I'll break your neck.' it works. No child is getting the best of me. Positive reinforcement takes a long time to work. I don't want to wait until June to have a perfect day. I want a perfect day in September.

Glenda: I don't know what to do to handle this boy. How can I keep him in his seat and keep him from hurting other people? I'm not supposed to touch him but he sticks pins in people and hurts them. Today a little girl knocked a paste jar off his desk and he pinched her real hard. I don't know what to do with him.

These comments by teachers meeting in a teacher group had a message! We need help. Help in reaching our students so that teaching stops being disheartening and becomes rewarding. The help, at least for these teachers,

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was participation in a teacher group. Working within a framework similar to group therapy, they gradually learned to handle their students by learning first to handle themselves. By the end of the group sessions, these teachers had solved many of their classroom difficulties:

Mary: The problem with Larry has been mostly due to me. I moved him closer to me. I'm giving him rewards and it's amazing how it's working. When I first got him in my room every teacher told me that it was a lost cause. Now he's getting his work done. He's coming along beautifully. It has been my fault and every other teacher's fault in this school. All he needed was a little extra effort on my part.

Peter: I'm using time between periods for socializing. It's a good break for the kids. I'm using older kids to tutor my slower kids and it's working real well. My kids are starting to come around. I don't know if they are coming around or if I'm coming around.

Glenda: But one thing I still have trouble with is trying to ignore the child who disrupts. Using praise does work but I keep slipping back and forget and then I start to holler. I feel happier in the classroom when I'm using praise. I feel like an old grouch when I start to holler. It's so hard to change.

Counselors can perform an invaluable service to teachers by leading teacher groups. The use of the teacher group can help teachers become more empathetic, more valuing of students' individual differences, more knowledgeable about the use of positive reinforcement and more aware of their own feelings and the feelings of their students. Teacher groups can best be described as an opportunity for teachers to meet in a democratic environment with their peers and openly discuss unresolved problems on the job. Although these professionals spend most of their school day in a densely populated environment they are psychologically alone since the opportunities to share these problems are almost nil. That is why a group specifically geared to help them in this area fills the gap. The group forces, together with effective leadership, create a climate which encourages educators to change their attitudes toward themselves and their students. Group leaders are

trained in creating a climate which fosters such growth and change in the individual members. And the members actively contribute to the process by helping each other recognize the causes of school difficulties, seek effective solutions and try new problem-solving approaches. The educator generally finds that changing his attitude creates an easier, more positive working relationship between him and his students.

Through two-hour discussions, over a period of generally fifteen weeks, with the school counselor as the group leader, solutions to problems emerge. Exercises are used during the first hour of each session to promote trust, explore feelings, promote empathy, valuing of individual differences and promote positive regard for self and others. The second hour is devoted to solving specific classroom problems.

Usually by the third session, an environment of trust and confidentiality has been created through the use of the group exercises. Thereafter, the teachers find it fairly easy to share classroom problems. Generally teachers complete the following steps in the problem solving effort:

Step 1 - Identify the problem

Step 2 - Relate unsatisfactory solutions

Step 3 - Generate a new plan of action for himself and help others do the same

Step 4 - Make a commitment to carry out the positive plan and help others do the same

Step 5 - Evaluate the new plan

It might be helpful to look at a problem raised by an elementary teacher participating in a teacher group experience as she sought to solve a problem with Larry, a student in her class. Direct quotations taken from the tapes, session by session, will serve to demonstrate how Mary changed her behavior and attitude toward Larry.

Session 1. Mary explains her method of handling discipline problems.

Step 1 and Step 2 — Mary: I sent Larry down to the office just to get rid of him. I feel, "Let the principal worry about him instead of me for awhile."

Session 2. Mary explores using positive reinforcement.

Step 2 — Mary: I keep reminding myself to be nice and compliment the child. I found I've been picking out the person who has been doing things wrong instead of picking out the person doing something right. I tried doing that and it made the good kids who were doing things good even better. It really helped a log of egos.

Session 3. Mary gives advice to another teacher.

Step 3 — Mary: Well, reinforce him. When he whispers, instead of hollering, say, "That's good!"

Session 4. Mary responds to Penny's presentation of a problem boy who swears and fights and does everything wrong in the room.

Step 3 — Mary: Maybe he needs more or a reward.

Session 5. Mary has read Sylvia Ashton-Warner's book "Teacher" and reports to the group what she did.

Step 4 — Mary: From reading the book, "Teacher" I decided to let the kids draw pictures of their fears one day. That day they were so noisy and restless that I felt I had to do something. It released their pent-up energy and was so good for them and me.

Session 6. Mary again explains how she handled a boy (Larry) who disturbed her class.

Step 2 — Mary: I sent Larry to the office and the principal sent him back to me with another boy who said, "The principal doesn't want to see his face." Well, I didn't want to see his face either. He was disturbing the class.

Session 7. Mary confesses that at times she regresses.

Step 2. — Mary: I slipped back today and started to yell at kids who were talking. They kept right on talking. Then I remembered and said, "All right let's sit up." I began to praise those that were sitting up and they got real quiet. Praise really works.

Session 8. Mary reports to group that she has solved her problem with Larry.

Step 4 Mary: The problem with Larry has been mostly due to me. I moved him closer to me. I'm giving him rewards and it's amazing how it's working. When I first got him in my room every teacher told me that it was a lost cause. Now he's getting his work done. He's coming along beautifully. It has all been my fault and every other teacher's fault in this school. All he needed was a little extra effort on my part.

Mary: At the beginning of the school year I hated Larry and so did the whole class as a result.

Session 9. Mary responds to Peter's negative remark that he doesn't believe his students will ever improve their behavior.

Step 4 Mary: Well, if you don't think they'll improve, they never will.

Session 10. Mary is elated over her success with Larry.

Step 5 Mary: Today I gave my class a list of words and asked them to find the root word. Larry only got two wrong and the brightest boy in my class got two wrong. I was so proud. I couldn't believe it. I was so happy. A month ago he wouldn't have written down anything. I sent him down to the teacher he's going to have next year with that good paper. She had been so worried (because of what she heard from others) that she was getting him next year.

It was very apparent that Mary's negative attitude toward Larry has become much more positive. She has changed her perception of him from that of being a poor learner to that of becoming an achiever. She moved him closer to her desk feeling that that would help him feel more wanted. She has used praise successfully with him and is delighted with his progress. She likes him more now and feels the whole class likes him more, too. She wanted to pave the way for his future academic success so she sent him to show his good work to his teacher for next year.

Teacher groups have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to help beginning as well as experienced elementary and secondary teachers, school psychologists, social workers, counselors and principals to significantly improve their Minnesota Teachers Attitude Inventory score. (Ruben, 1971, 1974). Moreover with few exceptions, those who have attended these groups have reported that what they gained in terms of insight and concrete alternatives for coping with students have made teaching immeasurably more satisfying. Do not misunderstand: teacher groups do

not offer a panacea for all an educator's ills. There are many problems inherent in the school system itself which must be solved through other means. But the teacher group can help the school professional alleviate classroom difficulties within his direct control, and just learning to do this can spell the difference between frustration and fulfillment. The school counselor can be an important person in facilitating the humanizing process.

A new book published by the author entitled, Our Teachers Are Crying: A Positive Approach to Solving Classroom Problems, (1975) should be of great help for counselors interested in beginning to lead a teacher group. It details the step-by-step process that a leader can employ to set up a successful teacher group. A warm welcome is extended to all counselors who decide to take the giant step forward to lead teacher groups. Our world needs such professionals.

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